



## DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

### INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release to PM's, August 17, 1960

#### EXPERIMENTAL HUNTING SEASON ON LESSER SANDHILL CRANES

An experimental 30-day hunting season on lesser sandhill cranes (commonly known as little brown cranes) will be permitted in a limited section of western Texas and eastern New Mexico, opening January 1 and closing January 30. This was announced today by the Department of the Interior. The limit will be two birds daily and two in possession.

This is the first hunting season on this species since the approval of the Migratory Bird Treaty by Canada and the United States. It was authorized after the Fish and Wildlife Service received an official request from the Canadian Wildlife Service, in an effort to solve increasingly serious crop depredations by growing flocks of these birds in important grain-producing areas of Saskatchewan.

The North American wintering population of lesser sandhills now averages about 200,000 birds. For several years, the Central Flyway Council also has been requesting a hunting season on the grounds that these birds were more numerous than several of the goose species hunted in that flyway and were causing depredation problems in certain concentration areas in New Mexico and Texas.

The lesser sandhill crane is listed as a game species in the treaty. Previously, hunting seasons had not been permitted, however, because of concern that greater sandhill cranes, whose numbers are now limited, might be killed. Investigations by State and Federal biologists have revealed no greater sandhill cranes in the area selected for the season. It is a major winter concentration area for lesser sandhills, however. About 75,000 visit this general area.

It was also pointed out that the lesser sandhill crane season will not open until after all whooping cranes have arrived at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Gulf Coast of Texas. There was a total of 33 birds in the winter count there last year.

Canadian officials have pointed out they have no safe solution to the lesser sandhill crane depredations problem in Canada. The area visited by large flocks of these lesser sandhill cranes in Saskatchewan is also visited by the endangered whooping cranes. Young whoopers cannot be readily distinguished from sandhill cranes. The whooper does not get its identifying white plumage until it is mature. Therefore, any crane shooting in Canada is at the risk of killing whoopers.

The entire problem was completely reviewed at the meeting of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington last week. On this committee are members of the National Waterfowl Council, representing the four Flyway Councils which are composed of delegates from the fish and game departments of the various States. Other members of the advisory committee represent national conservation organizations. W. Winston Mair, Chief of the Canadian Wildlife Service, and E. L. Paynter, head of the Wildlife Branch of the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources, were present at the meeting and spoke on the problem.

Canadian views are summarized in a letter by Mr. Mair to Daniel H. Janzen, Director of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife of the Fish and Wildlife Service. He wrote concerning the depredations in Saskatchewan:

"The situation last fall became so critical it was necessary to permit shooting to protect crops, under our regulations covering that type of situation. This was done reluctantly, because of the possible danger to whooping cranes . . . but was the only feasible action at that point in time.

"We are most reluctant to again endanger the whooping cranes. Saskatchewan has agreed that no shooting permits for sandhill cranes will be issued this year (on condition an agreement on an action to relieve the situation was reached with the United States).

"We feel very strongly that an open season on lesser sandhill cranes has to come . . . . Such a reason should really only be entertained in those wintering areas of the sandhills in the United States that are sufficiently removed from the travel routes and wintering area of the whooping cranes that the latter are placed in no jeopardy.

"We would ask you, then, to consider the possibility of an open season on lesser sandhill cranes this year. . . ."

It seemed to the Fish and Wildlife Service that the United States has a responsibility to cooperate with Canada in reducing crop depredations in Canada by the lesser sandhill cranes in a way which would insure the safety of the whooping crane.

Both the National Waterfowl Council and the Central Flyway Council recommended the limited season proposal. After a thorough discussion of the question with members of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee, it was concluded that a limited hunting season was the best approach to the problem.

The area where the hunting will be permitted has been described by the Fish and Wildlife Service as follows: The counties of Lea, Eddy, Chaves, Roosevelt, Curry, and Quay in the State of New Mexico, and that portion of the State of Texas lying west of a line from the International Toll Bridge at Del Rio, Val Verde County; thence northward following U. S. Highway 277 to its junction with U. S. Highway 87 at San Angelo, Tom Green County; thence northward along U. S. Highway 87 to the point at which it intersects the Texas-New Mexico boundary line in Dallam County.

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